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ABSTRACT

Learning to read and write effectively is a challenging task for many adults, particularly for those who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. In spite of concerted efforts by educators to facilitate the development of literacy skills in deaf individuals, most deaf high school graduates read English at roughly a third or fourth grade level as determined by standardized reading assessments. Having limited English skills acts as a barrier for deaf people in the workplace. They often have had limited opportunities at school for vocational training. They may also have difficulties communicating with hearing co-workers and may have poor performance on work-related reading and writing tasks. This digest offers possible explanations for these difficulties and describes new approaches in deaf education that show promise for improving the literacy skills of deaf students. Specific sections address the reassessment of sources of literacy difficulties (i.e., linguistic differences, cultural differences, and educational deficiencies), and current approaches to literacy development. (VWL)

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ESL Literacy for a Linguistic Minority: The Deaf Experience

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Learning to read and write effectively is a challenging task for many adults, particularly for those who are deaf. (The term "deaf" is used here to refer to both deaf and hard-of-hearing people.) In spite of concerted efforts by educators to facilitate the development of literacy skills in deaf individuals, most deaf high school graduates read English at roughly a third or fourth grade level as determined by standardized reading assessments (Allen,1986; King & Quigley, 1985). In their writing, they often make vocabulary and structural errors that include omitting or confusing articles, prepositions, and verb tense markers, and they have difficulty with complex structures such as complements and relative clauses (Swisher, 1989).

Having limited literacy skills acts as a barrier for deaf people in the workplace. They often have had limited opportunites at school for vocational training. They also may have difficulties communicating with hearing co-workers and poor performance on work-related reading and writing tasks. Because of these factors, deaf adults in the workplace often find themselves confined to low-level jobs.

This digest offers possible explanations for these difficulties and describes new approaches in deaf education that show promise for improving the literacy skills of deaf adults.

Reassessing Sources of Literacy Difficulties

For centuries, deafness was considered a pathological condition. Deaf people were considered mentally and educationally deficient due to their inability to hear and in need of special education and social services to minimize and correct those deficiencies (for a summary, see McAnally, Rose, & Quigley, 1987). However, following the groundbreaking work of William Stokoe (1960) and others, there has been a growing trend away from a pathological definition of deafness (Wixtrom, 1988; Woodward, 1982). Most educators and researchers in the field of deafness now believe that deaf people share similar language backgrounds and literacy challenges with other linguistic minority groups. Their difficulties with acquiring literacy in English are considered to have linguistic, cultural, and educational rather than pathological roots (Charrow, 1981; Johnson, Lidell, & Erting, 1989; Padden & Humphries, 1988).

Linguistic differences

One of the primary causes of difficulty with English literacy is that English is a language that deaf people have not heard or have heard only in a limited way. Thus, for them, American Sign Language (ASL) or another form of manual communication is the most accessible language because of its visual properties. As Charrow (1981) points out:

> It is not the inability to hear that causes the most persistent problems of prelingually deaf persons, but the enormous constraints that that inability puts upon the learning and use of the societal language. (p. 187)

Because deaf learners do not have access to English in its spoken form, the challenge for them of developing literacy skills is much greater, in some ways, than it is for hearing nonnative English speakers.

Cultural differences

A growing body of literature brings a social/cultural perspective to the literacy issues concerning deaf people. American Sign Language, the primary language of many deaf people, is now recognized by linguists as a complete, legitimate language with complex grammatical structures and extensive vocabulary. However, ASL is clearly a minority language in a majority culture that tends not to understand or respect sign language. (Swisher, 1989).

Despite the legitimacy of ASL, many deaf people grow up with ambivalent attitudes toward their own language, often feeling "inferior to hearing persons" (Kannapell, 1976, p. 11). Padden (1987) reports that deaf people's attitudes toward ASL vary between "intense pride" and "a great deal of confusion and shame" (p. 44; quoted in Swisher, 1989). This ambivalence extends to English as well. Because of the need to communicate with the non-signing public and to function in an English-literate society, most deaf adults believe that English literacy is important. Still, many hold an equally strong belief that they are unable to master it.

Educational deficiencies

Since the early 1500s, when educators began to realize that the "deaf and dumb" were capable of being educated, a variety of approaches have been used to develop deaf people's literacy. (For a summary, see McAnally et al., 1987.) Many educators today, however, argue that these approaches have been woefully inadequate (e.g., Johnson, Liddell, & Erting, 1989). Oral/aural and phonics-based approaches, for example, have not proven effective, since for deaf learners, printed words are not connected with sounds. Forms of Manually Coded English such as SEE (Signing Exact English), developed by educators to represent English on the hands, are cumbersome to use, do not adequately represent either English or ASL (Kluwin, 1981), and have had limited sucess. Remedial approaches, which have focused on pattern practice, vocabulary lessons, and teaching explicit rules (Charrow, 1981), break language into parts and do not allow English to be used in the natural way that it is acquired by hearing individuals. By adulthood, many deaf learners have had years of failure and frustration with learning to read and write in English.

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Current Approaches to Literacy Development

At the same time that they may experience frustration and failure, most deaf adults understand the need to be literate in English. As well as being crucial to success in the work world, written English is often the only way they have to communicate with a non-signing public. Recent, innovative educational approaches show promise for reversing the cycle of failure. Space allows only mentioning these approaches briefly, but the references cited provide ample information about them. Some have been used so far primarily with children, but may be effective with adults as well, with appropriate modifications.

- Bilingual/bicultural approaches, which integrate ASL and English and include using videotaped stories in ASL as a precursor to writing compositions in English (Humphries, Martin, & Coye, 1989; Mozzer-Mather, 1990; Paul, 1987; Quigley & Paul, 1984)
- Whole language and writing process approaches, which focus on problem-solving skills needed in the workplace and avoid overt correction of errors and breaking language into parts (Heald-Taylor, 1989)
- Interactive writing, in which deaf learners and teachers converse in written English on teletypewriters (Lieberth, 1988; Nash & Nash, 1982), on local- and wide-area computer networks (Peyton & Batson, 1986; Ward & Rostron, 1983), and in dialogue journals (Staton, 1990; chapters in Peyton, 1990)
- Interactive videodisc, in which computerized ASL video and printed English text are used simultaneously to help deaf learners develop their English skills (Copra, 1990; Hanson & Padden, 1989)
- Closed captioned TV programs, which allow extensive exposure to English through a recreational medium (Bean & Wilson, 1989; Spanos & Smith, 1990)

Conclusion

Mastering written English is a lifelong struggle for many deaf people. Deaf adults develop literacy differently than do their hearing peers. The above instructional approaches, which (a) are student-centered, (b) require meaningful use of both ASL and English, (c) incorporate and build on the language and cultural backgrounds and actual home and workplace issues facing deaf adults, and (d) use creative visual means to teach reading and writing, promise to make the educational process more meaningful, positive, and successful for deaf learners. The use of these approaches for developing the literacy skills of deaf adults needs to be carefully documented and the degree of success determined.

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